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Traveling to the farthest corners

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Bureau of Land Management Director Mike Dombeck helps excavate a square at the Mesa Site while Dr. Rick Reanier (standing), graduate student Michael Bever (center), and BLM archaeologist Eric Dillingham (right) observe.

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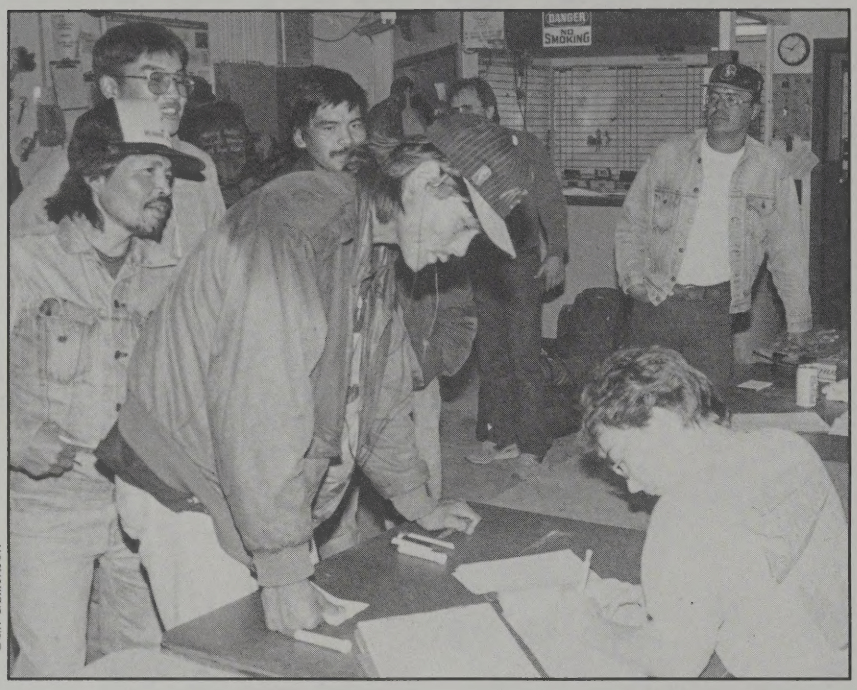
Alaska firefighters head south to battle blazes



Dan Gullickson

Emergency firefighters from Hughes sign in at the Alaska Fire Service in Fairbanks before flying to the Lower 48 to fight fires.

The Alaska interagency fire organization is geared to quickly moving people in response to fire emergencies. But 1,800 people in one week? That's how many people the Alaska Interagency Fire Coordination Center moved to fires in the Lower 48, according to Tom Dean, AIFCC coordinator.

The mobilization was one of the largest ever done by AIFCC, and it went off largely without a hitch. Fifty-five crews, each with 20 members, were assembled, hired, outfitted and flown to fires in the Pacific Northwest, all in the six-day period from July 25 to 30. Hundreds more, as well as aircraft and supplies, were sent in support of the fire-fighting effort. About 73 emergency fire fighting (EFF) crews exist in more than 50 communities, mostly Native villages.

The AIFCC includes the BLM Alaska Fire Service and the Alaska Division of Forestry. State and federal workers sit side by side in the dispatch office, and work together to move manpower and other resources to where they are needed.

The National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG), which determines national fire management policy, considers 40 crews in Alaska a "national resource." That's the number Alaska is committed to send to fires in the Lower 48. "Everything over that is negotiable," Dean said.

While the western United States sizzled in one of the worst fire seasons in years, Alaska's fire activity was relatively slow. Less than 250,000 acres, well below the seasonal average, had burned by the end of August. AFS released its first batch of firefighters June 27, sending the "booster crew" of 25 smokejumpers brought from Boise at the start of the fire season back to the Lower 48, as well as two hotshot crews. Over the next few weeks, AIFCC sent more smokejumpers and about 60 support personnel to fires in the Lower 48.

The logistics office and the fire management zones handled most of the details of moving the crews south. One of the biggest jobs was to find 55 crew representatives, experienced firefighters trained and qualified under NWCG standards to manage fireline activities. One representative is assigned to each crew and looks out for the safety and welfare of the crew members. Smokejumpers constitute the biggest pool of qualified crew representatives, but most of them were either in the Lower 48 or committed to fires in Alaska.

AIFCC also filled daily orders for "overhead" personnel to perform specialized support services. The logistics office rounded up qualified personnel, ordered airline tickets, told them where they were going and sent them off. "We had our travel agency, American Express, working almost 24 hours a day. They did a yeoman's job for us," Dean said.

In all, AIFCC dispatched 52 EFF crews, three hotshot crews, and five crews made up of U.S. Forest Service personnel from the Chugach and Tongass National Forests. The 60 crews were the most Alaska has ever sent south.

Fire crews are rotated every 21 days, and three weeks after they left, the crews began returning home. "It was like sending them out, except everything in reverse," Dean said.

Even with the majority of the fire-fighting forces in the Lower 48, Alaska maintained adequate resources for in-state needs. "Our first and foremost responsibility is to Alaska and we weren't going to jeopardize that," Dean said.

The crews brought back several million dollars earned as firefighters. Spread over more than 1,000 people, the fire fighting wages provided a major source of income in the villages.

—Andy Williams

National BLM Director tours Arctic District

Touring the far north

Mike Dombeck, acting director for the Bureau of Land Management, went through an intensive schedule when he visited the BLM's farthest north district in late June. From archaeology to wildlife, he saw the gamut of resource programs—all with an arctic twist.

After an all-employees meeting in Fairbanks, Dombeck visited work sites at the Alaska Fire Service, and toured the Arctic District by land and by air. Complicated air logistics were needed to cover even small portions of BLM-managed land in northern Alaska, and the Alaska Fire Service made sure the air trips went smoothly.

Flying northwest of Fairbanks, Dombeck was able to view the results of a recent wildfire not far from the road, complete with wildlife—a pair of black bears foraging through the mosaic of green, brown and black left in the burn.

On the graveled Dalton Highway, the BLM director saw recreation in action as he met out-of-state tourists, operators of a small tour-bus company, managers of the commercial facilities at Coldfoot, and visitors enjoying the Coldfoot Interagency Visitor Center run by BLM, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the National Park Service. For mining Dombeck toured both a large-scale gold mine and a small family-run drift gold mine.

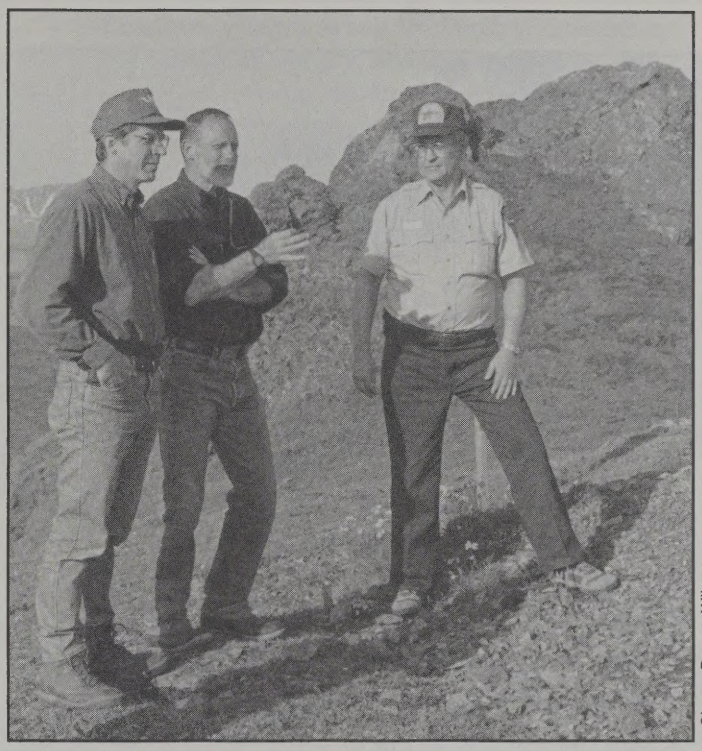
At Toolik Lake he talked to researchers with arctic research projects, and he learned about arctic fisheries at Galbraith Lake, where he visited fisheries biologists from BLM and the state Division of Sport Fish who were conducting an interagency fish study.

The crowning touch came with archaeology. A helicopter trip along the north face of the Brooks Range took Dombeck to the final destination—the Mesa Archaeological Site.

Dombeck's first trip to this world-renowned site of an 11,700-year-old Paleoindian culture was an eye-opener. The vast expanse of flat, open tundra, populated by caribou and grizzly, suddenly became more than just a colorful article in the Chicago Tribune.

Climbing the 200-foot-high mesa, Dombeck talked with the archaeologists and their assistants—graduate students, volunteers and cooperative education students. Trowel in hand, he carefully scraped within a square and found a small flake chipped from a rock thousands of years ago.

"You may never get me out of here, now," Dombeck said. "This is what I love to do."



Sharon Durgan Wilson

Standing on top of a 200-foot mesa on the flat arctic plain, BLM archaeologist Michael Kunz explains the excavation and findings of the Mesa Site to Acting BLM Director Mike Dombeck and Arctic District Manager Dee Ritchie.

With the isolation of the Mesa, the 360-degree view that extends for miles, and the backdrop of the snowcapped Brooks Range, the new BLM director had surely reached the farthest point away from Washington, D.C.

Dombeck impressed many of the BLM specialists with his knowledge and interest in their projects. Mike Kunz, co-director of the Mesa Site, said, "When Mike visited us at the Mesa and we discussed the project and toured the site, it was obvious by his comments and questions that he understood, at the scientific level, what we were talking about, whether the subject was stone tool manufacturing, climate reconstruction or obsidian hydration research."

While in the nations capitol, the acting director will now be able to field many questions about Alaska issues and problems with firsthand experience. In addition to seeing the beauty and expanse of northern Alaska, Dombeck had a better feel for issues facing BLM managers in northern Alaska when he left.

—Sharon Durgan Wilson

Swiftwater Rescue training 1994

KJ Mushovic

BLM outdoor recreation planner, Janelle Eklund, the Swiftwater Rescue instructor and a Gulkana River veteran, stands next to Jim Robbins, Joe Westermyer, Tim Wilson and Lou Volpe, who made up the recreation crew stationed at the Canyon Rapids on the Gulkana River during the Fourth of July holiday weekend.

Once again, the Glennallen summer recreation crew's presence on the Gulkana River averted trouble for Fourth of July boaters.

The crew, made up of Student Conservation Association volunteers Tim Wilson, James Robbins and Lou Volpe, and seasonal outdoor recreation planner Joe Westermeyer, had been stationed at the Canyon Rapids for most of the holiday weekend. The crew did pull a man out of the water after his prototype inflatable canoe overturned, but the weekend was mostly uneventful. However, as they prepared to leave the area, they encountered two couples with canoes hesitating at the lower end of the Canyon Rapids portage.

"The Gulkana River was running high over the Fourth of July weekend," said Glennallen District outdoor recreation planner Janelle Eklund, a Gulkana River veteran. "There was eight miles of white water below the portage, and there are some tricky turns and rocks to watch out for."

The canoers were worried about navigating the rapids and were considering portaging all their gear seven miles out to the Glenn Highway via the boggy Haggard Creek trail.

The recreation crew was preparing to continue downriver in two Avon Scout rafts, and offered to accompany the canoers. One of the women in the canoe party was still leery, so the crew had her ride in one of the rafts while Robbins volunteered to pilot one canoe in her place.

Robbins led the two canoes. He successfully negotiated a sharp right turn. Wilson and Volpe, following behind, rounded the turn to find the second canoe swamped in the middle of the river.

"They were standing in the water, just looking at the canoe in disbelief," remembers Wilson. "We waited a few minutes to see if they could get going again, but they didn't."

Wilson and Volpe brought their raft to shore, and were quickly joined by Westermeyer and Robbins. Robbins made his way to the canoe and brought the couple safely to shore using a shallow water crossing technique he had learned in Swift Water Rescue training only weeks before.

The crew set up a "mechanical advantage," another technique taught in the class, which uses a system of ropes, carabineers and pulleys, to pull the canoe to shore. The canoe was dented but usable after Volpe performed a little "duct tape surgery." The only gear lost was a raincoat.

Noted Wilson, "We observed 35 rafts, 17 canoes and at least 132 people on our trip. Even the very experienced boaters were glad we were there, just in case they needed help."

—KJ Mushovic

AFS serves as operations center for Koyukuk flood

When residents of three villages along the rising Koyukuk River were evacuated to Fairbanks this fall, the BLM's Alaska Fire Service became the operations center for the flood relief effort. An incident command team, normally used to fight large wildland fires, was called in to manage the effort to provide services to the people uprooted by the flood and to rebuild the communities.

The highest water ever recorded on the Koyukuk River flooded villages in late August. Allakaket, with about 175 people, was the hardest hit. The flood damaged, destroyed or carried off virtually everything. One house was found more than 35 miles downriver, intact and with furnishings in place. Alatna, a smaller community across the river, was equally damaged. Hughes, 50 miles downriver, was partially protected by a bluff that diverted the main current away from the village. But it, too, was rendered unlivable. Residents of all three villages were evacuated to Fairbanks.

While volunteers and agencies searched for housing for the villagers and arranged for schooling and other human services, work began on rebuilding the communities. The AFS team arrived from Boise on Sept. 13, the day President Clinton declared the flood a major disaster. They coordinated with the Alaska Division of Emergency Services and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and with village residents and others in devising and implementing plans for rehabilitation.

The runways were repaired, first at Hughes and then at Allakaket, and a major airlift began to bring supplies and workers to the communities. Staging and flight operations were housed in the new addition to the AFS Fire Cache in Fairbanks. Work crews, primarily village residents and emergency firefighters from surrounding villages, cleaned up and repaired homes and community buildings and utilities. About 25 homes were restored in Hughes. The utilities, town hall, washeteria and other services were also restored. School was held in the community center while the main school building was being repaired.

Work in Allakaket was geared to providing temporary housing and basic services for about 70 residents who plan to return there this winter. Long-term restoration work is being planned for the spring, along with rebuilding Alatna. A large construction contractor, H.C. Price, is now managing the rebuilding effort and the state Division of Emergency Service continues to oversee the project.

—Andy Williams

AFS bike program wins energy award

During the summer, bicycles buzz around Alaska Fire Service facilities like bees.

AFS has a fleet of about 75 bicycles that are used in lieu of motor vehicles to go between AFS facilities on Fort Wainwright in Galena, and around other field stations, saving thousands of dollars in fuel and maintenance for government vehicles. Recently the AFS bike program received national recognition with a BLM energy conservation award. The Energy policy Act of 1992 and other legislation mandate federal agencies to devise strategies to save energy. The award program recognizes agencies and individuals that make special efforts to conserve energy.

Supply chief Chris Pearson said AFS bought its first six bikes in 1976 for the Galena field station. The barracks building at Galena is more than a mile away from the zone offices at the airfield, and the cost of transporting vehicles to Galena, and fueling and maintaining them there was a major expense.

Since then the bikes have spread to most other AFS facilities. At Fort Wainwright, where AFS facilities are also spread out, people use them to go from the barracks to the mess hall and their job sites, and from the headquarters building to the operations building. Materials handlers use special cargo bikes to load supplies from the warehouse onto aircraft. Most of the smokejumpers use their own bikes for personal use. Pearson estimated that bicycles are ridden more than 18,000 miles annually, and a minimum of six more vehicles would be needed if the bikes were not available. "Additionally, many individuals use their personal bikes at their job site and many of them use bikes for their physical fitness program," he said.

Galena, with 32 bikes on site, still leads AFS facilities in numbers of bicycles. Bob Quillin, fire management officer for the Galena Zone, said aircraft crews and others temporarily assigned to Galena use the bicycles between the barracks and the airfield. "Rather than send a government rig, we provide free bicycles. It gives people a lot more mobility than if they were to wait for transportation."

"Of course, we have to go out and herd all those bicycles back in the right direction every once in a while. It's like a reindeer roundup," Quillen said.

The award recognized the bike program for saving the government money, and supporting the national effort for conserving energy and improving air quality.

—Andy Williams

Herbarium blooms on through winter

Glennallen District now houses a herbarium, begun by Student Conservation Association volunteer Kris Makkay, under the direction of district wildlife biologist Mike Coffeen.

Makkay, a recent graduate of the University of Waterloo (Ontario), with a degree in environmental studies, spent time on a variety of projects in the district. The most enduring evidence of her work in Alaska will be in the form of a herbarium, a beautiful yet scientific record of plant identification.

"It's more scientific than a simple pressed flower collection," explains Makkay. "It identifies a plant precisely down to the genus and species, and it provides evidence that a particular plant exists in a certain place."

Despite the name, a herbarium consists of all plants, not just herbs. Makkay is initially concentrating on flowering plants.

All scientific techniques to identify plants utilize what are known as keys, a kind of logical procedure of elimination and segregation based on the characteristics of the plant. Makkay has been using *Flora of Alaska and Neighboring Territories* by Eric Hultén.

One of the first steps in the key is to determine if the specimen has a flower or not. Makkay begins her real research in the key devoted to flowering plants, carefully determining what characteristics each specimen has, and going from one key to another until she can decide exactly what sort of flowering plant the specimen is.

"I usually need to have a sample of the whole plant, from root to the top, unless it is really too large to bring it all back, in which case, I make notes about it. I also make notes about the date, the location of the plant, and how the petals looked," says Makkay. "And I always try to get an extra flower or two for the purpose of tearing it apart under the microscope."

"Fresh is best for studying, but they wilt so fast, you have to press them in order to preserve them," continues Makkay. "Then I sometimes re-hydrate them when I study them back in the office."

In a mixture of water and a tiny bit of detergent, the flowers again become flexible, making it easier to examine, dissect and observe under the microscope.

Makkay had her first experience with collecting while still in secondary school, and learned more about the scientific method used for plant identification and proper display procedures during botany classes at the University.

Once pressed and mounted on archival paper, the collection should be available to district employees for quite some time.

"I had a professor who traveled to England and saw specimens pressed a century ago," recalls Makkay. "He said they might as well have been pressed yesterday."

The new herbarium contains 20 identified and mounted specimens, and is under the care of Mike Coffeen.

—KJ Mushovic

Kris Makkay, a Student Conservation Association volunteer, continues her research on flowering plants.

Tok nature fair proves a hit with kids

The Tok Field Office teamed up with the Tetlin National Wildlife Refuge and other local, state and federal organizations to put on a Kids Nature Fair at the Tok Public Lands Information Center in August. The fair proved very successful with more than 150 kids visiting in three hours.

The fair featured endangered animal face painting, a game that tested the participants knowledge of local birds, Smokey Bear, and other activities that stressed natural history.

BLM contributed a "Creatures of the Fortymile River" game, where the object was to match photos of various "creatures" present in the Fortymile area, including miners, recreationists, moose and grizzly bears. The game was developed by Craig Pollard, a Science Conservationist of America volunteer, and Dan Ritzman, a BLM seasonal employee.

The "bear" is Sherry Vanderlinden, a dispatcher with the Alaska State Troopers.

Dan Ritzman, a seasonal outdoor recreation planner with the BLM, stands next to the game he helped develop.

Environmental center profiles visitors

If you come out to the BLM's Campbell Tract in Anchorage, your visit may be a little different from those in the past. It's likely that you'll be asked questions about the Campbell Tract by a BLM employee or BLM volunteer. This is part of a visitor profile being done by BLM to gather information about the tract's users. It's also apart of a larger planning effort for the tract.

In July, the BLM's Anchorage District Office began working with a natural resource planning firm, Sustainable Decisions, Inc., to develop a monitoring plan for the Campbell Tract. This year-long project will involve monitoring recreational and educational activities, and their affects on the tract's natural resources. BLM's 1993 development plan for the Campbell Tract recommends this planning process in response to increased visitor use attributed to the building of the Campbell Creek Environmental Education in 1995.

Campbell Tract is a 730-acre natural area located in Anchorage and is managed by the BLM Anchorage District. The area is primarily a BLM administrative site and its many recreational trails attract diverse users such as bikers, hikers, horseback riders, and skiers .

The monitoring plan, based on the Limits of Acceptable Change planning system, will ensure protection of desirable resource and social conditions. It will also determine if changes are occurring, where they are occurring, and what management actions are needed to maintain quality educational and recreational activities and prevent degradation of resources through overuse.

Through questionnaires, surveys and public meetings, the BLM, Sustainable Decisions, and the public will identify desired future conditions of the Campbell Tract, inventory existing conditions, and set indicators and standards for resource and social conditions.

—Danielle Allen

frontier flashes

Brenda Zenan has been named the new Deputy State Director of Conveyance Management for BLM-Alaska. She will direct the conveyance of federal land entitlements to the State, Alaska Native corporations and others as part of BLM's overall land management of about 89 million acres of public land in Alaska.

Zenan transfered from Washington, DC, where she served as a realty specialist. She is a graduate of the U.S. Department of the Interior's managerial development program, and previously worked for BLM in Alaska as a land law examiner from 1974 to 1976.

▼

The BLM is overseeing the **cleanup of an old mercury mill site** located two miles southeast of Aleknagik. In the early 1950s the site was used to remove mercury from cinnabar ore taken from a nearby mine.

The site, which consists of a retort used to heat the ore to remove the mercury, a shed and barrels of fuel, poses potential health hazards to anyone exposed to the mercury-contaminated structures or soil. The retort shed and retort are the primary sources of contamination, which includes about 150 cubic yards of the soil under or near the shed. Preliminary tests indicate no contamination of the water table or the nearby Wood River.

The cleanup will include removal of suspected fuel, removal of the shed and retort, and containerization and removal of the contaminated soil.

▼

A Virginia woman working as a volunteer at the remote Bering Glacier was **mauled by a brown bear** early in the morning of July 29.

Elonora Florance, 43, of Reston, Virginia, was in her tent at the time of the attack. Her cries for help brought fellow workers to her aid, and the bear was killed. She was flown to the Cordova hospital for initial treatment of claw injuries to her back and arm. Later, she was transferred to a hospital in Anchorage.

The camp included approximately 13 federal researchers from the BLM and US Geological Survey studying the rapid movement of the glacier. Florance, who is a public health nurse, was working in a Volunteers in Science program with the US Geological Survey.

The **BLM/State of Alaska Joint Pipeline Office** was awarded the Vice President's prestigious Hammer Award in September. The employees were honored for their efforts in making the Joint Pipeline Office a model of intergovernmental cooperation and efficiency.

The Joint Pipeline Office, established in 1990, is made up of six state and five federal agencies who oversee all permitting and regulatory work for oil and gas pipelines in Alaska, including the 800-mile Trans Alaska Pipeline System. Each day JPO employees cross organizational and intergovernmental boundaries to help ensure the environmentally safe transport of 25 percent of our nation's crude oil supply.

Also honored were the self-directed work teams of the BLM Alaska Cadastral Survey Division. By eliminating mid-level supervisors and reducing full-time positions, the survey division freed additional funds for contracting under Public Law 93-638, the Indian Self-Determination Act. This project allows Alaska Natives to contract with BLM to survey the lands they are entitled to under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

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